

How to ease 'eco-anxiety'

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Body

Today, we hear more about environmental challenges than ever before. From climate change, to plastics in our oceans, to lost species; every day there are more stories about the problems facing our planet.

In fact, the term "eco-anxiety" has been coined to express the angst, grief and trauma we face as we observe the distress of ecosystems around the world. As adults, we are somewhat equipped to process these feelings. Children, on the other hand, are not.

It's time to shine a light on the issue of kids and climate-related anxieties.

Children have shown themselves to be baffled by government inaction, as expressed through recent climate marches and personified through youth activists. This has resulted in feelings of hopelessness about their future and future generations.

These feelings are not far off from reality as children are disproportionately impacted by the health effects of climate change. Research suggests that youth are at greater risk of long-term trauma from climate-related extreme events. For example, a Canadian study of the mental-health effects of the 2016 Fort McMurray wildfire found increased suicidal thoughts, depression and tobacco consumption among youth exposed to the wildfire.

Climate-related anxieties can be particularly troublesome for young children who have no way to express their concerns and often struggle silently. Many parents are unsure of how to approach these issues with their kids.

This gap in knowledge-sharing isn't helped by our current education systems. A 2019 survey conducted by Lakehead University and Learning For A Sustainable Future found only a third of closed-sample educators in Canada reported teaching on climate change.

So, what are we to do? First, we must show children how they can transform their anxiety into learning and passion through action.

Studies show children have an innate ability to learn about nature and animals. They are open to environmental education and interested in being part of a community that inspires change.

Additionally, talking about and acting for the environment can effectively influence adults around them. We must create safe spaces for kids and their parents to learn, talk and act to meaningfully contribute to a better environmental future.

Many organizations such as Earth Rangers, a national environmental charity focused on kids, are guided by this philosophy. The charity recently launched an app that brings conservation to life for kids by inspiring them to

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undertake environmental missions in the real world. The program has proven to help kids believe they can make a difference and foster a more positive outlook on the future of the planet.

Apps and programs like Earth Rangers enable parents to begin conversations about conservation with their kids and create the space to vocalize emotions about the state of the planet.

They can also be critical avenues to learn about climate change and the environment. The same study by Lakehead University and Learning For A Sustainable Future found almost half (43 per cent) of Canadians failed the climate change knowledge test.

Today, we have an opportunity to meet children where they are - digitally - and encourage real world activities and exploration. Day-to-day actions, such as going meatless for a meal, recycling batteries, practising water conservation or even exploring a local park, are just a sampling of the types of activity we should encourage.

These small, actionable steps have proven to alter children's outlook and show them how they can have a positive impact on their environment. On a fundamental level, we know people report a greater sense of well-being when outdoors. Taking environmental action - even in small ways - engenders hope and empowerment.

Children have already been part of the solution - and will undoubtedly be central to climate action moving forward. We must therefore continue to show the next generation how they can pave a sustainable path forward. And provide them with a safe place to start.

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